

Interview #1

Interview with George Rongner  
in Eastham, Massachusetts

by James Owens  
October 3, 1981

Q: This is an interview with George Rongner on October 3, 1981 on Nauset Road for the Oral History Project of the Eastham Historical Society. The interview is being done by James Owens.

What we are going to do is to start with the story of your birth.

George Rongner: I was born in Orleans on December 20, 1918 in a building which later became Dr. Bessie's office, Dr. Bessie being a dentist. My mother nearly died when I was born. Dr. Marbel was the doctor and he finally asked my dad who he should save, me or my mother, because the time was coming when he had to make that decision. However, just before he decided to puncture my head, it being my dad's desire that my mother live, I burst forth into the world.

My father was from Chicago-- or rather he was born in Chicago about a month after his parents migrated here from Sweden. My mother was born in Boston. She later was adopted by George and Anne Moore of Eastham. My dad ran away from home when he was sixteen. Very shortly after he enlisted in the U.S. Marines.

Around 1917 he was stationed in Orleans at the French Cable Station and that is where he met my mother. He used to meet her at the moving picture theater in Orleans and they would arrange for a date the next week when he would get off. When my grandmother found out about this, she paid another girl to go along with my mother, because she didn't want any Marines fooling around with her daughter. However, my dad bought a bag of candy for the accompanying girl and she very knowingly and sympathetically sat apart from them, so that they could hold hands and do whatever people did in the movies in those days.

Q: Could I ask you one quick question? Where was the movie located in those days?

George Rongner: It was in Orleans. I believe it's right across from what is now Livingston's Drug Store. [As of 1988, Denmark's Pharmacy] It was owned by the Wilcox's.

Q: That was the building that was known as the Snow Block?

George Rongner: Yes. And later my mother played piano at that same theater, in the days of silent pictures. My dad took me there to see a movie and when there was a burst of applause, I would look up to see my mother walking down the aisle with her sheets of music. As a youngster, I thought that my mother was quite a hero and everybody was applauding because they liked her so much. It was not until later that I realized that they were

impatient for the movie to start.

My dad ran away from home because his mother had died and his father remarried, and he did not get along well with his step-mother. He never saw his own family again, except for one sister. He had a brother who he had not seen in fifty years, who was about to visit him in Eastham when he died of a heart attack.

Q: That's the brother who died?

George Rongner: It was the brother who died of a heart attack before he could make it here.

If I may get back to my mother's family. As I say, she was adopted by George and Anne Moore, who for many years lived in the Salt Pond House, or what is now known as the Salt Pond House. I loved my grandfather, George Moore, for whom I was named. My grandmother always tried to make a Little Lord Fauntleroy out of me. She meant well. She wanted me to grow up to be a gentleman, but at that stage I resisted, unfortunately.

I also remember my great-grandfather, who was a Civil War veteran. As a youngster, I knew George Moore was "Gramp", but I couldn't figure who my great-grandfather was, so I called my grandfather "Gramp" and the other fellow was "More Gramp".

I was an only child, probably very spoiled, as I had no sisters or brothers, as my mother was unable to give childbirth after I was born. They chose not to adopt any children, even though they spoke about it on occasion. My dad was away from home most of the time as I grew up. He was stationed in the

Coast Guard and he was gone for eight or nine, ten days at a time, and when he came home, it was just for a day or two. My mother actually was the one who raised me in effect. My dad, however, introduced me to people, one of whom was Henry Beston, who wrote *THE OUTERMOST HOUSE*. My parents were not conversationalists, although I was encouraged to read a great deal, which I did.

After meeting Henry Beston my life changed, because he was a magnificent person and he talked so glowingly about nature and about history that I too became interested in that sort of thing, and I grew to love the beach and the marsh, the Indian lore. I have read everything that I could find about the Cape Cod Indians, especially those of the Nauset tribe. I have spent many, many hours alone, by myself, searching for Indian relics. And Henry Beston also taught me that flowers and shrubbery were children of nature, so I spent many hours picking wild flowers, identifying them and bringing them home to my mother.

I think probably Henry Beston had more influence on my life as a youngster than any other single person. This was just during the pre-Depression days, and although they say the Depression was not felt on Cape Cod as dramatically as elsewhere, I recall most of the people being very poor from a monetary point of view. My dad's salary was sixty dollars a month at the Coast Guard. This was our entire income, and more than half of that went for the mortgage on the home that he built on Nauset Road. I can remember them saving their pennies and nickels, putting them in a can, so that when Christmas time they would



have enough money to buy three tickets for the chicken pie supper at the Town Hall.

My mother was thrifty. She was the manager of the finances. My dad earned the money, but he turned it all over to my mother and she dispersed it. I can recall her using sheet after sheet of newspaper, figuring money, how she could disperse it and still have enough left to buy an occasional suit of pants for me, or to buy something for herself, or to even buy the groceries. Every nickel counted. I remember one time my dad came home minus about a dollar and a half of his check, which he had spent on a huge steak. And my mother liked the looks of the steak, but she was furious, because he had spent all this money on meat, money that they could ill afford. From that time on, having remembered how much that steak cost, whenever Mother mentioned that she might like to have some steak, I would say, "Well, Ma, I don't really like steak. I'd prefer hot dogs or hamburgs or something like that." I guess that was my way of contributing to the dispersal of the family funds.

My first remembrance of Eastham was growing up at what is now the Swift-Daley House. It was a two-family house at the time, and we lived in the north section. Unfortunately, I forget the name of the elderly couple who lived next door, because they were marvelous people. The man would occasionally give me a nickel for candy. He smoked Sickled tobacco, or rather he chewed Sickled chewing tobacco, and I liked this, because he gave me the little metal sickle that came on each package of the gum.

I started school in Eastham from the Swift-Daley House. I

walked to the school and back, except when it was raining, and then I would stand out in front of the house and wait for Harry Collins' bus to come by. I don't know what make it was, but it had old black curtains that he snapped into place when it rained or snowed, so that the youngsters would be dry. I much preferred walking. Took the bus only when my mother made me stand out there and take it.

My first teacher was Florence Keith, a marvelous lady, who also was to teach me a great deal about how beautiful the plant life is. So she was the second influence in my life. The second major influence, if you would. She also was an extraordinarily good teacher. She had ways of teaching that perhaps would be frowned upon today. I recall when we were learning to write our names and do a few simple exercises in writing on the board that I thought I would be different one day, and I started from right to left, and she permitted me to fill the blackboard and then she told me I was acting like a Chinaman, because they always did things backwards. I thought that this was a compliment and sat down. She very quickly came to my desk, and before I knew it I was back at the blackboard erasing everything that I had done and doing it properly.

I remember getting in trouble because of a girl. This was the daughter of Winnie Knowles, who was later to become Police Chief in Eastham. I understand he is almost ninety today, still living alone. But he had a daughter, Miriam, who was the best looking girl in the school, and all the boys wanted her to be their girl friend. But there were so many

they decided to take a vote and see who would win out. And  
~~CARLTON~~ ~~EDWARD~~  
Calvin Mayo, Everett Horton, and Ralph Saunders were the  
winners and those three could claim Miriam as their girl friend.  
Ralph later was to become Director of Music at the Eastham  
schools after Mr. Nassi left.

Shortly after that I went to Orleans with my dad and he  
picked up two calendars from either the Smith Brothers or Harry Snc  
and on the way back home we met Winnie Knowles and Winnie said,  
"Gee, Yngve, those are nice looking calendars." Yngve said,  
"Well, maybe you'd like to have one. Well, wait a minute," he  
says, "I can't do that. They both belong to George." And Winnie  
says, "Well, Miriam would like to have one of those." And my  
father says, "Would you like to give Miriam one?" And I  
remembered that I couldn't be Miriam's boy friend, because three  
others had her. But Winnie says, "Well, I'll tell Miriam that  
you gave it to her." And I thought, boy, this is a real good  
idea, I'll get back at those sons-of-guns. So I said, "Sure."  
And so Winnie took the calendar.

Well, I had a big mouth, and the next day I went back to  
school and when they were talking about their girl friend Miriam,  
I said, "Well, I gave her a calendar, so I think that she is my  
girl friend too." Well, they almost beat me up for that, because  
they said, "Well, you know that we decided that just three of us  
can have her as a girl friend." I was out sick a lot in those  
days, so they finally decided that I didn't get the word because  
I was out sick that day, and that's the only thing that saved me  
from destruction, I guess. [LAUGHTER]

Miss Keith apparently got tired of me when I was in the second grade. She taught the first three grades and she didn't want any more of me, so she pushed me ahead to the fourth grade, when I had Virginia Horton as a teacher. She too was an excellent teacher, having good rapport with her pupils.

During that time, however, I spent most of the school year in Rockport, because my dad had been transferred from Nauset Station to Rockport, when he was advanced to Bosun's Mate.

I was back, however, for grades six, seven and eight. And I had for a teacher, of course, one of the legends of Eastham, Otto Nickerson. Otto was the third person in my life who influenced it so greatly. He taught us so many things that it's almost impossible to list them now. But he taught us how to appreciate poetry. And we had to learn various poems and we had to make up our own poems. He taught us how to read and to detect what the author meant by many of the sentences and paragraphs in his books. So he taught us to sort of dissect the books as well as to enjoy them.

Otto certainly maintained good discipline, there is no doubt about that. We all knew about his strap, which he kept for the most part in his desk. He rarely used it. He didn't have to, because we all knew it was there. We all knew that he would use it if he thought it was necessary.

Otto had us put on plays and he had us write plays. He just taught us so many things. He even taught seventh graders algebra. A marvelous person. He made us feel like we were big wheels when we were in the eighth grade.

graduation ceremony for the eighth graders and we felt just like a college student, with our caps and gowns and our diplomas and making our speeches. I'm sure that others remember particular stories about Otto. Practically everyone who had Otto for a teacher remembers him. All of us today still refer to him as Mr. Nickerson. Our wives who don't happen to be from Eastham call him Otto, but we, his former pupils, could never think of being disrespectful, even today. So he still is Mr. Nickerson.

I was a member of the Universalist Church as I grew up. I was a member because my mother was and my grandparents were. And that is called the Chapel in the Pines today. My parents were not very religious. They seldom went to church. They never admitted that they weren't religious. I can remember going to play though with some of the neighborhood youngsters, and my mother would caution me before I left home, "Now, you know that So-and-So's family is Methodist, so if they start to talk about religion, you just clam up and don't you say a thing now, Georgie."

Politics, of course, played a small part in my life. We were all Republicans at the time, except for Abbott Knowles, and he was looked upon with scorn at election time, because they knew he was going to vote Democratic. Abbott was a nice fellow and everyone liked him. They just didn't like his politics. Politics was later to play somewhat of a part in our lives and we may get into that later.

Growing up without much money, we tried to devise ways of earning money, of course. Clams and quahogs weren't being bought

at that time. All of the clams and quahogs were being shipped to the Boston markets by the few people who did do that sort of thing for work, and we as youngsters couldn't possibly sell them, so that was out. We did, however, fight forest fires on occasion. When the trains from Boston to Provincetown would send off sparks from their steam engines that would start a fire, and we would all rush to the scene and help put it out. I recall Aden Gill coming around to tell us to all put in our time. So every time the train went by, I guess we sort of hoped that it would start a fire.

In the winter, when the roads were clogged with snow-- it seems as though there was much snow in the thirties, the early thirties-- Nate Nickerson, who was road surveyor, would let us all pitch in with a shovel, and I think that the Town paid us twenty-five cents an hour for shoveling snow.

We also gleaned cranberries. When the cranberry bogs had been picked and were about to be flooded for the winter, we were permitted to pick the cranberries that were growing in the ditches. These we could sell by peddling them from house to house. I remember getting fifteen cents a quart for them.

I guess the so-called big money that we made was caddying though at Cedar Bank Links, owned by Quincy Shaw, who was, of course, a direct descendant of John Adams and John Quincy Adams. He would have weekend parties, always consisting of people who liked to golf. His season started during the Patriot's Day weekend, when he had the so-called Sunset Club, mostly older people. I think that there were about ten members in that club,

but they all played golf, so that meant that ten of us would get a job caddying Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes they would play twice on Saturday and once on Sunday, and we would get a dollar for caddying eighteen holes. So this was three dollars that we could make during the weekend.

Occasionally he would have larger parties and sometimes he would have thirty-five or forty golfers for a weekend. Occasionally they would play even on a Friday. Once in a while we even caddied double, so on a real good weekend we might come away with six or seven dollars. Some of the fellows were fair tippers too. I remember John Charles Thomas, the famous baritone, would slip half a dollar ~~in~~ into our watch pocket.

My greatest thrill at Cedar Bank was caddying in a group that contained the immortal Bobby Jones. The man for whom I caddied was no slouch either. He was Francis Quimet, who won the English Open at a very young age. It was a tremendous thrill to see Bobby Jones and Francis Quimet playing golf so professionally, making these superb shots on this extremely difficult Cedar Bank Links. It is reputed that no one ever made par on the original eighteen hole golf course, and that weekend Bobby Jones came within one. I believe that he was one over par on one round and two over on another. Francis Quimet was about three over par.

Herbert Jaques was another golfer. He owned a home in Eastham, in the Nauset section, for many years. He also was president of the Golf Association of America. Joe Bachelor was a New England champion. He was another very good golfer. C.

Aubrey Smith-- I believe he was an Englishman-- of the movies was a constant-- not a constant, but an occasional visitor who played golf. I remember C. Aubrey Smith as being a tall, moustached gentleman.

My grandparents worked there. My grandfather was the chef for a long, long time. We would hover around the back entry, where the golfers would emerge three and four at a time, and we would all crowd around the door and shout, "Can I caddy for you?" And we were alert at the first shadow that indicated that somebody might be coming into that part of the house. And C. Aubrey Smith came in one time to grab his clubs, and he decided to check the ball pouch before coming out, and it was filled with lemons, and he was very angry. "Damn it, they're always playing tricks on me! They steal all my good balls and stuff lemons in there!"

After the weekend golfing sessions were over, we all hustled back to the links to search for golf balls and tees that had been lost. And Quincy Shaw was good to his caddies. We were not professionals by any stretch of the imagination, and he made sure that all his friends knew that we were not professionals. However, Quincy Shaw brought down a group of old clubs and asked-- I believe it was Dan Sparrow who was the manager of the course at the time-- to make sure that each boy who caddied had at least one or two clubs. He was to divide the clubs equally among the caddies and they were to be permitted to use the golf course when no one else was there, because as caddies he was sure that they would observe the rules of good conduct by replacing



divots and not take advantage of his generosity.

I went to school in Orleans, as did everyone who graduated from Eastham. Spent four rather uneventful years there. I recall Herbert Stewart very vividly, because he ruled with an iron hand the same as Otto Nickerson did, although he was very fair. He liked to tell jokes, which we enjoyed, of course, as youngsters, in that we didn't have to study.

During all this time life was still tough and caddying was one of the few jobs that we were able to utilize for any money. Other than that, my first job was cutting asparagus for Charles Chase on Nauset Road. Charles was the father of Ralph Chase, whom everyone loved, another splendid person. We used to be in the asparagus beds at six o'clock in the morning, or just after sun-up, cut asparagus for two and three hours, and I'm sure others will go into the asparagus portion in tapes, it being the most important economic phase of Eastham's life at that time.

I had wanted to go to college as so many others did, but decided to enlist in the Coast Guard, against the wishes of my father and others. Through my grandfather, who cooked not only at Quincy Shaw's, but also at Matthew Luce's and at Hemingway's-- through my grandfather-- I'm repeating myself here, you must forgive me for this, because I'm reminiscing-- but it was through my grandfather that I met Robert Saltonstall, who was to become Senator from Massachusetts, and he pledged that I could have my choice of going to West Point or Annapolis after I graduated from high school. For some reason, which is lost on me now, I refused his offer and instead I enlisted in the Coast

Guard as a surfman, and I enlisted at Chatham, Massachusetts, and for a few hours I was at the next station to my dad, who was at Old Harbor, a few miles north.

Q: When was that?

George Rongner: This was in 1938, early 1938. I don't know, we went to the Barnstable Fair-- to Brockton or some place-- and he bought a pipe with a tremendous big bowl, and he said, "Now the next time Arthur comes over, I'm going to ask him if I can have a bit of his tobacco to fill my pipe. And then I'm going to reach in back of me and get this one with the big bowl." [LAUGHTER] He did it for a chuckle.

I was at Chatham Station for about two hours when I was shipped to Cuttyhunk Island, which is fourteen miles south of New Bedford. I was stationed there for a couple of years and then I moved to Monomoy Point as a surfman. And there we walked the beaches the same as the old surfmen used to. One patrol would go north and the other would go south. And we would stand our watch in the tower, watching for the shipping. Nothing very exciting happened there.

And then along came a man by the name of Adolf Hitler and things changed dramatically. I was transferred, along with two men from each station on Cape Cod, to Norfolk, Virginia to man the naval transports, or at least to man the few that they had at that time. There we trained to run the assault boats that would later carry the Marines and the Army ashore when they

landings. And I was attached to a vessel called the USS AMERICAN LEGION in troop attack transport.

On December 7th, 1941 I was in Norfolk and I was at a movie, attending a movie with two of my friends, when it was interrupted with the announcement that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor, which I thought at the time probably was in Alaska. It was then that we knew that we were at war, because Pearl Harbor at least was a United States possession.

We then were trained-- by that I mean that we were sent back by train to Boston and then to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where the AMERICAN LEGION was being overhauled. The USS AMERICAN LEGION, that is. And after a few months it was ready and we picked up a load of soldiers, started for Europe, got off at Halifax when a German submarine sent off a few torpedoes-- none of which hit our ship, but which came close enough, and the detonations from another ship were enough to open seams in the vessel, which sent us scurrying into Halifax and from there back to Boston to a shipyard. Then from Boston back into New York, where we loaded with troops and left in a blinding snowstorm on an April morning. Then into the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal, and into the Pacific. And later we were to be in the first landing on Guadalcanal, when the United States made its first strike against the Japanese.

When the war was partially over, we were detached, after having trained the Navy youngsters to handle boats in surf. And I came back to the United States for reassignment and was fortunate to be transferred back to Nauset, about a mile from

And there I stayed until I became a Chief Bosun's Mate, and from there I went to New London, Connecticut. I made two cruises on the EAGLE, the Coast Guard training ship. And that was significant in my life, because I was to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to Denmark and to Oslo and to sail back again. From there I was transferred to Fire Island Coast Guard Station in New York. And then back to Provincetown, Massachusetts Race Point Station, where I was Officer-in-Charge, and then became a Warrant Officer and assigned to the Buzzard's Bay Lightship as Commanding Officer. From there I went to the Coast Guard Cutter WHITE SAGE, with a tour as Executive Officer of the Coast Guard base at Woods Hole in between.

While Commanding Officer of the WHITE SAGE, John Kennedy lost four potential votes, because he was supposed to visit the Coast Guard base and the two ships at Woods Hole one Sunday afternoon, and therefore as CO I was recalled to make sure that my ship was presentable. It wasn't really my ship, but commanding officers referred to the ships as "my ship". I always tried not to. I made a slip-up just now, so I had to explain it.

John Kennedy was supposed to come aboard, so I took my two youngsters and two stepchildren down with me, so they could meet and shake hands with the President. And we waited and waited and various Secret Servicemen were all over the place and they cautioned us that we weren't to have any cameras when the President came into view. I recall the crew being disappointed, so when the Secret Servicemen were out of hearing, I told them

not to show the cameras, but to make sure that they used them in a satisfactory manner when the time came.

John Kennedy's white convertible drove in the yard. The Secret Servicemen and we were all ready to meet our President. Another hour went by. The Secret Servicemen went out the gate, the convertible departed without the President, and someone came down to announce that the President's wife had become ill because it was rough that day, and being seasick, Mr. Kennedy thought it best to go back into Hyannis.

My children therefore did not meet the President, and as we walked home up the hill, one of them said, "Who does he think he is anyway? Just because he's President, he can keep us waiting two hours and not show up? I'll never vote for him." And the other three decided that they would not vote for him either.

I had my first real brush with a hurricane as Captain of the WHITE SAGE. I was in the service during the 1938 hurricane that raised such havoc in Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts, but I happened to be home on liberty at the time. The island of Cuttyhunk, on which I was stationed, sustained great damage, and the crew who were on duty in my absence received medals for their heroism during that terrible storm.

During hurricanes the ships at sea-- those in port-- are dispersed to areas where they will be relatively secure from the path of the hurricane. So when one came along-- I forget the year, '52 perhaps-- I consulted with the skipper of the Coast Guard Cutter HORNBEAM, who also moored at Woods Hole. And we decided that we would go into Buzzard's Bay and anchor

Island, which is close to the western entrance to the Cape Cod Canal. We did this because of the direction in which the hurricane was predicted to approach that area. However, when the hurricane did arrive, we were in the exact wrong place, because the winds had veered around so that we were directly in its path. And we were fortunate that there were no rocks or shoals around, because each of us dragged about a mile and a half before the fury of the storm abated enough so that we could get under way. We did not have power enough at all to move in the path of the hurricane. It would have been useless. As it was, we kept our engines going ahead about one-third speed into the path of the hurricane, and we still dragged that mile and a half backwards.

I neglected to say that when we were at Guadalcanal I recall being moored on the beach-- I believe it was the second day-- and I looked around and there was Leonard Tarvers of Eastham, who was on the BETELGEUSE, and Burton <sup>KELLEY</sup> Carey of Eastham, who was on the McCAULEY, and there was George Nickerson of Eastham-- I forget that ship he was on-- but the four of us were from Eastham and here we are on this little island in the South Pacific.

Q: Could you tell a little bit about the Haymow Stamp Club that you belonged to? The group that had the letter from the President's office that you gave the Historical Society?

George Rongner: There were several of us in the Nauset neighborhood who collected stamps. <sup>LLOYD</sup> Willard Mayo had a collection of stamps given to him by people who once owned it.

is now called the Captain Linnell House, and he gave them to his younger brother Kenny. I too was a stamp collector. And one of the Sparrow boys was a stamp collector. So we decided that we should have a club. We had no place to meet, so we decided upon ~~Warren~~ Mayo's barn and we met in the hayloft. And eventually there were several-- forgive me, there were seven of us-- it's not a difficult word. [LAUGHTER] There was Kenny Mayo, Robert Sparrow, Donald Sparrow, Fenton Sparrow, Bill Watson, Bob Watson-- the latter two half-brothers of Prescott Cummings-- and myself. And we formed what we called the Eastham Haymow Stamp Club. We called it the Haymow Club, because that's where we held our meetings. Later Dan Sparrow cleaned out one of his chicken coops and it became a very lovely little club room, heat and table and chairs.

We knew that President Roosevelt was a stamp collector, and even though he was a Democrat, we decided that he was worthy of membership in our club. So we drafted a membership card. We made our own cards from cardboard that probably came from old cereal boxes, but anyhow, we made one and put the President's name on it and dutifully mailed it off to him. And we were quite surprised within a week to receive a reply from the White House, written and signed by his private secretary, Miss LeHand, stating that the President was delighted with our thoughts of him.

When this became known locally, it became a human interest story of the day, it being during the Depression. Times were very difficult, but people were looking for the lighter side.

George Rongner: Yes. Well, okay, we can go back to that. Back to school, back to school we go.

When I was in the sixth grade-- this would be 1929, 1930 perhaps-- a man by the name of Thomas Nassi came to town. Or came to the area. And the local school district, which then consisted of Chatham, Harwich, Orleans and Eastham, decided that they would offer instrumental music to the pupils, and Mr. Nassi from Albania was selected as the teacher. We attended a concert at the Old Exchange Hall in Harwich before we were permitted to select our instrument, because the Barnstable School at that time already had this in their curriculum. And they had soloists who played just about every available instrument, to indicate how it could be done.

So we went over there, four or five of us, in a car which some parent furnished. And then we made up our minds what we wanted to play. I forget how it was financed, but instruments were made available at a very reasonable amount of money. I selected the viola. And I selected it because of the performance at Exchange Hall. A gentleman played a splendid solo on the viola. Originally I had thought of the violin. But Mr. Nassi was a splendid musician himself and he could play every instrument and play it well.

He taught us in individual groups for a while. That is, he taught-- the violinists would have their session and then the trumpet players would have their session, and drummers, and so forth. And Barbara Atwood, who played the --



session together, because the strings are the same octaves. And finally he formed us into a group of just Eastham students.

Our first performance-- public performance, that is-- was at the Town Hall in Eastham. And the proud parents were in attendance, of course, and we were pretty proud of ourselves as we sat on the stage. This was the old Town Hall, which now is used as office space. But we were very proud to sit up there and have Mr. Nassi direct us, and as everyone applauded, he would turn around and bow and smile.

Mr. Nassi was a superb person. He left Albania for what reason I know not, but he was friends with King Zog, who was the ruler of Albania before the Communists took it over. And how Mr. Nassi could do this I haven't the faintest idea, but with thirty-five members playing simultaneously, he would, in great discuss, use his baton to signal an end, and then he would point at some poor culprit playing the violin and say, "That was C sharp. You played just plain C. Now let's go over this again." He had that acute an ear.

He later had the four towns play together. That is, Chatham, Harwich, Orleans, and Eastham. He had the four schools playing together. And this was great. We enjoyed this. We went around to various towns on the Cape and played as a group. And later Mr. Nassi formed a Philharmonic Orchestra of the better players. He would select the better players from each group and invite older players too, who lived on Cape Cod. And he had a group of perhaps fifty. And I was fortunate to be one of the fifty, and this was not because I was such a good player.

was one of the few who played a viola. And my claim to fame is that I was the worst musician that the Cape Cod Philharmonic Orchestra ever had.

Back to the first concert we played at the Eastham Town Hall. At intermission Otto Nickerson made his way up onto the stage and he approached me, and I was chockfull of smiles because I thought Otto was coming along to say, "Gee, what a great job you're doing, George!" But instead he looked at me with great disdain and said, "George, for heaven's sakes get that wad of gum out of your mouth. You're spoiling the looks of the whole orchestra." [LAUGHTER]

My dad was a Chief in the Coast Guard, and in those days the Chiefs on the Coast Guard Stations were called Captain, and he was for the rest of his life referred to as Captain. People would say, "How are you, Captain?" And later, when I went into the Coast Guard and received my advancements, I ultimately outranked my dad. However, the highest official title that I was ever called was Commander, because I was once a Group Commander. I was called Captain while I was aboard ships, but they weren't here, so no one around here ever thought of me as Captain. But people did think of me as Commander, since I was a Group Commander. And therefore my dad, who was well below me in rank, always outranked me as far as the local people were concerned, because he was Captain and I was never anything more than Commander. And I was happy about this. [LAUGHTER]

I remember one other thing about Arthur Brown. As kids-- my dad said he hated to live in this neighborhood.

to go down the road, because he never knew what we kids as a group were going to holler. He loved the area, don't get me wrong. He loved living here. He just didn't like to walk down the road when we kids were together as a group, although he liked us individually. But when we were together, he was always apprehensive. And I remember we would hide in the bushes when we knew that Arthur Brown was going to come down the road, because he would always go over to the post office or to Harvey Moore's at night. And so we would hide and wait for him, and just after he got by, we would all holler in unison, "Arthur Brown went to town with his britches upside down." And we would run like hell! [LAUGHTER]

(TAPE OFF)

Rongner: --during the middle part of the war.

Q: Yes, because I remember being here at that time on a visit from Newport. We got a ride around in a duck that they had here. And there was a wreck of a Grumman Torpedo Bomber that hit on the beach, because Jim gave us some fifth caliber bullets from it, which horrified my mother. What do you remember of that time period? This is almost more personal than anything else, for me.

George Rongner: Oh, yes. I just remembered that Jim Brown was sort of like a Group Commander. He was a Warrant Officer. And he was loved by all the crew. He was a young man.

officer and did his job extremely well and was respected. He didn't like all the pomp and ceremony. I remember one morning three or four of us waited for him to drive into work at eight o'clock, and we ran around the corner and accosted him and saluted him, and his return salute was a thumb on the nose. [LAUGHTER] Because he knew that we were doing this to him.

I don't recall much activity during the time that Jim was there, except that we used to man the power surfboat to retrieve the targets and the planes, the target planes, when they were having gunning practice in South Wellfleet. I guess that was an adjunct of Camp Edwards. And they used to-- the anti-aircraft gunners used to fire at the-- I forget the name of the planes, but they're little small planes.

Q: Drones?

George Rongner: Drones. Yes, we used to retrieve these. I remember one of the parachutes was retrieved one time, and Jim was going to have his mother or his wife make a shirt from the silk that he retrieved from it. [LAUGHTER] And I was here at the end of the war. Jim was transferred by then, at the end of the war.

The service already was on an austerity program and the personnel was greatly reduced. And they even took the Bell Telephone away from Nauset Station, so that anyone who wanted to call Nauset Station had to first call Chatham and then they would be switched over and the fellow in the lookout tower...

would somehow connect them through into the Coast Guard switchboard to Nauset.

The regular Officer-in-Charge was off and I was temporary-- I was Acting Officer-in-Charge when I got a call from the Boston District Office one night that a German submarine was off the coast of Eastham and apparently was going to come in very close to Nauset Station and surrender, and that I was to be on the alert for this. And I wasn't to say a thing about it. I was to keep this quiet. However, by piping-- by switching in through Chatham, the people at the Orleans Station, Chatham Station, Cahoon's Hollow, and all the rest could listen in, and about an hour after the call four or five Coast Guard officers rushed in with-- all dressed in uniform. They had forty-forties strapped to their sides, because they had found out about this and they wanted a piece of the action. They wanted their pictures in the papers accepting the surrender of the U-Boat. They didn't want it to go to a Bosun Mate, like I was at the time. That's about all I recall of this..

Q: The submarine never showed up?

George Rongner: No. That's right, the submarine never showed up. In fact, an irate Admiral's aide called me a bit later and asked why I had not kept it under cover as I was told. I was told not to say anything about it and yet suddenly everybody knew about it, and why did I tell when I wasn't supposed to? And I had quite a time explaining the telephone system that they had :

effect, and I think the following week each station had its own private line. [LAUGHTER]

END OF TAPE

Eastham, Cape Cod at Guadalcanal in the South Pacific

Eastham, Massachusetts, in 1941 a tiny Cape Cod town of about 500 individuals, was typical of small hamlets all across the nation, contributing a large share of its available manpower to the continuing and sometimes desperate struggle for the survival of freedom.

A Surfman with the rating of Boatswain's Mate 2nd. class in the U.S. Coast Guard, I was a resident of Eastham, assigned to the Naval attack transport U.S.S. American Legion as coxswain of a landing craft. During the invasion of the Solomon Islands, August 7 - 7, 1942, I was destined to unexpectedly meet several of my neighbors.

First, after nudging the beach at Guadalcanal with a load of supplies I heard a greeting from someone in the craft alongside. There stood George Nickerson, USCG, a distant Eastham cousin. Not more than an hour later, returning to the ship for more supplies, and as I was passing the transport U.S.S. Betelgeuse, another familiar face widened into a huge grin as Leonard Tarvers, USCG, also from my home town, shouted something mirthful. Leonard always was cheerful, no matter the circumstances.

The following morning, when abreast the transport U.S.S. McCollach. a figure waving frantically from the bridge and hollering "Key, George!" evolved into Burton Kelley, USN, a one-time classmate at the Eastham Grammar School.

*Eastham in the South Pacific/2*

It was almost pleasurable, seeing home town folks so far away from our native environment, clustered in a most unlikely corner of the earth, even though we were acutely aware that every hour might be our last. As a result, we probably appreciated life and one another all the more.

All of this, however, was preceded four months earlier, on April 18, 1942, by the Doolittle air raid on Tokyo, a rash attack but an enormous morale builder for all of America. A gunner and turret specialist on one of those planes was Edwin W. Horton, another Eastham school classmate.

Against highly unfavorable odds we all returned safely. Some other Easthamers, unfortunately, were not as lucky.

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life and this human interest story was of that ilk. The newspapers sent reporters and photographers to take our pictures and we were quite proud to be lined up for the camera and see ourselves on the rotogravure of the local newspapers. And people around the country picked up the story and it was broadcast over the radios, at least the New England radios, and we received letter after letter filled with stamps and congratulations from people who were themselves stamp collectors.

We remained as a group for probably two years. I don't know, we sort of disbanded. I don't know why. I rather think that the letter had something to do with it, because we all wanted the letter on our own mantelpiece. I wanted it in my home and Kenny wanted it in his home. The Sparrows wanted it. And so we just weren't having fun any more, so we ceased being a club.

But it was great while it lasted. We learned a lot about stamps and enjoyed them tremendously. And we had our weekly meetings. We even put on a show one time. We had a skit and one of the boys played a trumpet solo. We had comedians, and we showed our stamps. And I think we had ice cream and cookies or cake or something afterwards, and we even made our own tickets. We had a matinee performance for the younger people, and we had an evening performance which our parents very gracefully attended and stated that they enjoyed themselves thoroughly. And we used this money to buy stamps and books on stamps. It was a very enjoyable two years.

Q: Did you play an instrument?